

Waterfowl Advisory Committee  
Minutes, February 13, 2007  
Rembert Dennis Building  
Columbia, SC

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chair Sam Hiott, Billy Ray Cato, Campbell Coxe, Lin Fore, Robin Inabinet, Craig Sasser, Phil Wilkinson, Stephen Thomas

MEMBERS ABSENT: William "Tadpole" Baldwin, Jr., Carlyle Blakeney, Jr., Craig LeSchack, Parker Barnes, Jr.

DNR STAFF PRESENT: Hank Stallworth, Breck Carmichael, Val Nash, Derrell Shipes, Sam Chappellear, Bob Perry, Jim Westerhold, Dean Harrigal, Walt Rhodes, Stephanie Thompson, Greg Smith, Susan Johnson

Chair Hiott opened the meeting and the minutes of the November 14, 2006 meeting were approved as submitted:

ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS:

Robin Inabinet stated while he did not get to hunt as much as usual during the past waterfowl season, the quality of the hunting he experienced in the Santee area was not good. He stated he would like to see more emphasis put on improving hunting in the Santee and Midlands areas, as well as other parts of the state. Inabinet also stated that many individuals do not feel the Waterfowl Advisory Committee is going to be able to accomplish much toward improving duck hunting in South Carolina.

Chair Hiott stated the reason for the Committee is to work with DNR staff to provide quality waterfowl hunting opportunities and waterfowl habitat. He further stated members of the Committee are dedicated in achieving these efforts and he feels that in time a difference can be made.

Lin Fore stated there have been some areas where improvements have been made and the Committee has had an impact in that effort. Fore stated while he did not get to hunt as often as he would have liked, he had a pretty good season.

Stephen Thomas stated he hunted the coastal areas, Santee Cooper and the Santee River and his season was reasonable. He supported Mr. Inabinet's comments regarding the Santee Area. Thomas stated he would like to see the Committee first decide what the problems are, study the solutions and let the public see the thought processes that led to the solutions. Thomas also stated he would like to see the Department collect some information on what impact the inclusion of Carr and Little Carr Creeks in the WMA program has had on the area. Thomas would also like to see a thorough discussion of the mallard release program.

Member Cato stated he had the best duck season he had experienced in ten years. Cato hunted Lake Moultrie and Cooper River early in the season.

Craig Sasser stated based on opportunities he had to hunt, the season was one of the better in recent years. He hunted primarily on the lower Pee Dee, upper coastal areas. Sasser attributed the success to the full moon early in November, early flooding, and improvements on ponds. Also, Sasser spoke with hunters that hunted Big and Little Carr Creeks and was told their experience was very positive. Sasser further stated he heard that hunting in the Woodbury area and further up the Pee Dee River was very good this year.

Campbell Coxe stated the upper Pee Dee hunting was the best it has been in five years, maybe more, in terms of the number of birds. Coxe stated duck management continues after the season and encouraged managers and landowners to stay focused on keeping impoundments full and bird friendly.

Phil Wilkinson stated his observations primarily involved the upper coast and he felt the season was very positive, especially on the Wildlife Management Areas.

Chair Hiott stated hunting in the Ace Basin was very good this year.

#### CONSTITUENT COMMENTS:

One constituent stated he thought the duck numbers were up early in the season due to a cold snap in December. He reiterated Mr. Inabinet's comments regarding habitat in the Santee area.

Another constituent reminded the Committee that next week the Santee Refuge would be holding public meetings concerning its comprehensive management plan. He further stated the Refuge's plan to manage waterfowl should be of interest to this Committee.

#### AVIAN INFLUENZA (AI) SAMPLING UPDATE:

Derrell Shipes, Chief, Statewide Projects, Research and Survey provided a handout (copy attached to the original minutes). Shipes complimented staff on the success of the sampling effort. DNR Biologists Felicia Sanders, Dean Harrigal, and Walt Rhodes, with support from the Regional staff conducted the sampling. DNR partnered with the USDA in this effort. Shipes stated a total of 1,400 samples were taken in South Carolina. Included in the sampling were 7 species of live shorebirds and 7 species of harvested ducks. Shipes stated one sample tested positive for an AI virus (a pintail from the Ace Basin) and was sent to the National lab for further testing. The National Lab did not report any high pathogenicity from that sample. Shipes further stated staff exceeded objectives under the Federal grant for AI sampling.

#### MID WINTER WATERFOWL SURVEY RESULTS:

DNR Biologist Walt Rhodes presented a power point presentation and a handout (copy attached to the original minutes). Rhodes stated the mid winter waterfowl is a cooperative survey between DNR and the US Fish and Wildlife Service and has been conducted annually since 1955. The Service provides the pilot and airplane and DNR

provides the observer. Rhodes just completed his 15<sup>th</sup> year of observing and the same pilot has flown since 1990.

Rhodes stated the survey this year was the second lowest since 1955 at 63,481. Total ducks were down 37% from the previous year and down 29% from the ten-year average (dabblers and divers). The survey was flown on January 19<sup>th</sup> and January 20<sup>th</sup>, the same dates used in January 2005 and within a few days for surveys done in the past five years. Areas flown are Santee Delta, Santee Coastal, Ace Basin, Bear Island WMA, Combahee and Edisto Rivers, Santee, Savannah, Ace and Pinckney Island National Wildlife Refuges. Rhodes noted that the service pilot had flown surveys in NC in previous weeks and saw extremely large numbers of waterfowl, especially around Lake Mattamuskeet.

Chair Hiott asked how much of the population decline can be attributed to the loss of habitat or the lack or change of management. Rhodes stated that his experience has been that although some areas are not flooded every year, South Carolina has plenty of wintering habitat even with occasional fields that are drained. Rhodes stated Middleton Pond is a location where there has been a noticeable change in the duck population. He stated this once was a location where many ducks once wintered, but houses have been built in this area and waterfowl have abandoned it due to the disturbance. Similar situations have occurred up and down the coastal area.

At the end of the presentation, Derrell Shipps presented Rhodes with a plaque provided by the US Fish and Wildlife Service for his years of devoted service as a crew member on the Mid-Winter Waterfowl Survey.

#### 2006 WMA WATERFOWL SEASON RESULTS

DNR Biologist Dean Harrigal provided a handout (copy attached to the original minutes). Harrigal stated this year's statistics include 7 Category I areas, 6 Category II areas, the 2 regular season adult/youth areas and a few special adult/youth hunts throughout the season. There is a recorded harvest of 4,431 birds by 2,225 hunters with a harvest of 1.99 per hunter (retrieved harvest). Harrigal stated this number is slightly down from last year when a 2.2 duck per hunter harvest was reported.

On Category I waterfowl areas, 2.91 retrieved birds per gun compared to 3.09 retrieved birds per gun last year. The Category II harvest was 1.26 retrieved birds per gun versus 0.98 last year. The adult/youth hunts averaged over 3 birds per gun. Harrigal stated the WMA hunts had what he considers to be a good year. The long term average for daily harvest per hunter as calculated by the US Fish and Wildlife Service Harvest Program is approximately 1 bird per gun. Harrigal further stated weather has a lot to do with waterfowl hunter success on the wildlife management areas as well as the hunters themselves. Harrigal stated the WMA results have been posted on the DNR web page and will remain there until the beginning of waterfowl season next year.

#### WAC GOAL AND OBJECTIVES:

Deputy Director Carmichael provided copies of the mission statement and goals, and a summarization of the ideas Committee members offered toward each goal at the May 2006 meeting (copies attached to the original minutes).

Carmichael stated that 5 main recommendations were compiled from the Committee's previously offered ideas. They are: 1) Continue peer review process; 2) Develop a strategy for an increase in the state waterfowl stamp; 3) Identify new waterfowl management opportunities; 4) Survey waterfowl hunter opinions; and 5) Establish regional waterfowl working groups.

Chair Hiott stated it is the Committee's desire to continue peer group reviews. At the Committee's last meeting discussion was entertained on Bonneau Ferry and/or Sandy Beach WMAs (due to their geographical location) being the locations for the next peer reviews.

The Committee discussed the fact that the previous peer review reports were submitted to the DNR Board for their review prior to being released to the Waterfowl Advisory Committee. Members voiced their opinion that it was this Committee who recommended the peer reviews and future reviews should be submitted to them prior to review by the DNR Board. Chair Hiott stated he would take this recommendation to the DNR Board Chairman.

The Committee also decided it would be good to conduct a follow-up to the peer reviews within five to six years of the initial review, with a mid term evaluation/progress report. Committee member Thomas stated he would like to see Category II waterfowl areas being included in the peer review process.

In discussing the time in which peer reviews should be conducted, it was determined that February through the end of September would be the most appropriate time to conduct the reviews.

Committee member Inabinet suggested inland areas be considered for review (particularly the Santee Cooper area). Chair Hiott agreed these reviews should be considered for the entire state.

Chair Hiott stated he will discuss with Deputy Director Carmichael staff's recommendations for the next peer review focus. Additionally, he stated the Committee needs to get approval from DNR management and the DNR Board to pursue increasing the duck stamp fee. Committee Member Cato asked if the Committee needed to get a legislator to sponsor a bill for the increase. Chair Hiott will contact the DNR Board Chairman to discuss this issue.

Chair Hiott asked if there were any new waterfowl management areas. Deputy Director Carmichael stated DNR is discussing with SCE&G an area in the upper part of Lake Murray for a potential site.

Committee member Inabinet inquired about management of the Santee Cooper area and DNR Environmental staff member Bob Perry stated in addition to discussions with SCE&G regarding Lake Murray/Saluda Hydro Relicensing, staff is also deeply involved in negotiations with Santee Cooper regarding Lakes Marion and Moultrie and their hydro operations relicensing. Perry further stated staff is negotiating habitat with the utilities and he feels the people of South Carolina, particularly the waterfowl community, will be pleased with the end results of the negotiations.

Chair Hiott asked about a survey of waterfowl hunter opinions. Derrell Shipes stated there have been four previous waterfowl hunter surveys, the last occurring in 2005. He further stated 74 percent of the hunters surveyed (360 individuals were contacted by telephone) indicated their support for an increase in the state duck stamp. Shipes stated staff has the tools to conduct a survey or to contract one but could use help in developing questions to include in the survey. Committee Member Fore stated this effort would be redundant so soon after the 2005 survey.

Chair Hiott asked about forming regional waterfowl groups. Deputy Director Carmichael reminded the Committee about their previously discussing hosting regional public meetings to give waterfowl hunters an opportunity to voice their opinions regarding waterfowl issues. Carmichael further stated DNR staff would assist with this effort should the Committee decide to pursue it.

Bob Perry advised the Committee that DNR Staff had recently met with Santee Cooper to review their data on aquatic vegetation. Perry stated that hydrilla is making a return in a limited capacity. Perry reminded the Committee that DNR and Santee Cooper have a cooperative agreement with a goal to return at least 10% of the lake area in desirable aquatic vegetation. Perry also stated there has been dramatic increases in other aquatic vegetation on the lakes (2006 data indicates a sixty percent growth in aquatic vegetation). The largest increase occurred in submersed aquatic plants. Total aquatic plant coverage for Lake Marion is 9.3% and Lake Moultrie is 6.2%.

Perry stated surveys conducted in October indicate a highly preferred waterfowl food plant that is making a comeback is *Vallisneria americana* (tape grass or eel grass). While a waterfowl response to this plant has not been observed yet, Perry stated the potential is there. Perry also stated this plant is documented to be beneficial to waterfowl in a number of parts in North America. The other main plant making a comeback is lemon bacopa. Perry stated the lemon bacopa beds were teaming with invertebrates and he believes that will translate into a waterfowl response.

DNR Staff and Santee Cooper staff are recommending 2,620 sterile grass carp be introduced back into the lake system (2,100 in Lake Marion and 520 in Lake Moultrie) as a maintenance stocking to keep the hydrilla under control. Perry stated this is a very low stocking of 1 fish per 60 acres, whereas the normal stocking rate for ponds with weed problems is 20 fish per acre. Additionally, contact herbicides will also be used to keep the hydrilla in check.

Perry also informed the Committee DNR Staff is in discussions with Santee Cooper for a cooperative plan to enhance waterfowl habitats at Hickory Top, Santee Cooper, Sandy Beach, and Potato Creek WMAs and other areas. Perry stated another topic of discussion with Santee Cooper is to improve the habitat conditions on the Hatchery WMA.

#### OTHER OLD/NEW BUSINESS:

Committee member Fore stated he had heard many positive comments from the public regarding the Carr and Little Carr Creek WMAs. He commended DNR staff on their efforts in this regard. Fore also asked about the possibility of DNR staff developing a brochure similar to DNR's Dove hunting Guide (information on the legalities of preparing fields for dove hunting) for waterfowl. Fore stated such a document would be very helpful to conservation officers and landowners. Derrell Shipes stated he will work with DNR Law Enforcement staff and Federal staff in this effort.

Committee member Fore also stated he was selected for one of DNR's draw waterfowl hunts. He stated on the morning of the hunt, a DNR Conservation Officer physically searched individuals participating in the hunt for extra shotgun shells above the 25-shell limit. Dean Harrigal stated there is a written WMA regulation stating entry onto WMA land constitutes consent to an inspection and search of the person, game bag or creel. Shipes stated he will check with DNR's legal staff about this issue. Fore stated he had no problem with the regulation itself but the way it was enforced. Fore further stated hunters are not aware they are consenting to a physical search when entering WMA lands. Chair Hiott asked if the Committee could have a report on this at the next meeting.

Committee member Fore also asked about DNR's current stand on hunting preserves and the released mallard program. Shipes stated there seems to be misguided belief among some that DNR will attempt to outlaw shooting preserves and outlaw the release of pen raised mallards under any scenario. Shipes informed the Committee that last year the General Assembly passed a law (with DNR support) to grandfather the existing thirteen pen-reared mallard shooting preserves, and remove released mallards as legal shooting preserve species for the future. Pen-reared mallards can still be released and harvested within the regular waterfowl seasons and regulations, and the DNR has no intent to attempt to outlaw this activity, although the biological staff has some concerns about the practice.

Committee member Sasser asked the Committee to discuss and consider preference points for adult hunters who apply for draw hunts with a youth.

Committee member Fore asked for exploration of utilizing some of the ten days not utilized from the federal framework for youth hunting opportunities.

Committee member Wilkinson stated while having the youth hunt after the regular waterfowl season works well for owners of privately-held waterfowl habitat, it does not work on public waters where disturbance has pushed the ducks away by season's end. In

order to reach large numbers of youth, something has to be considered other than private hunting.

Committee member Sasser reiterated the good job private landowners did in getting youth involved and suggested more coordination with private landowners and more opportunities for youth applying for the draw hunts.

Committee member Inabinet suggested the youth hunt occur earlier in the season.

Chair Hiott asked for discussion of youth waterfowl hunts at the next meeting.

Committee member Thomas asked to receive information on Carr and Little Carr Creeks at the next meeting. He stated he had heard of negative impacts on surrounding properties that received a lot of pressure they did not get prior to the creeks being placed into the WMA program and being limited to Wednesday and Saturday morning hunting only.

**TIME AND PLACE OF NEXT MEETING:**

Tuesday, May 8, 2007. Time and location to be announced.